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# Trade Unions in Soviet Russia

*With a Foreword by*  
**A. B. SWALES**

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## FOREWORD

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ANYONE who visits Russia and comes into contact with the trade union organisations there, must bring back a very vivid impression of their vitality and the immense work they are carrying out. Above all, I was impressed by the fact that the trade union officials, both at head office and in the districts, were young men full of energy and enthusiasm, and capable of building up the trade unions in every aspect of their work. But it is not only the leaders who have been responsible for the progress made. The Revolution has opened the way for the rank and file of the workers, and they have shown their worth. I venture to say that in Soviet Russia, the proportion of active rank-and-filers is far higher than in any other country of the world.

The results of this activity can be seen in the tremendous growth of the trade unions, which now have a membership of over 9 $\frac{1}{4}$  millions—double the trade union membership in Britain! And yet the Soviet trade unions number 23. There they are organised on an industrial basis, and the single Metal Workers' Union embraces workers who in Britain are organised in a multiplicity of unions.

Much of the work of the Soviet trade unions is on the same lines as here. They have to look after their sick and unemployed members, and watch the interests of their members in collective

agreements. But in many respects their work is far wider, owing to the fact that a workers' government is in control, and the whole social system is different. The Soviet trade unions in fact are the masters of the country; they share in the planning and carrying out of production, in the framing of laws protecting the interests of the workers, and even in the administration of these laws. The opportunities of the workers of Russia are not bounded by their individual earnings or savings; the lad who has promise in any technical subject, in any administrative post, in any artistic or literary subject, is nominated by his trade union and gets the best opportunities the country can give him.

Similarly, the worker who is sick gets the best attention and, on the nomination of his trade union, is sent free of charge (and drawing full pay) to one of the rest-homes or sanatoria where he stands the best chance of recovery. I can speak from personal experience of the excellence of these sanatoria, and of the accommodation and treatment which are at the service of every worker.

In these and many other ways the trade unions in Soviet Russia are acting to develop the opportunities which have been opened to the workers by the Revolution. The more we know about Soviet Russia, the better it will be for the workers in this country, and I hope that this pamphlet will help to give British workers an understanding of the growth of the Trade Union Movement in Russia and of the very valuable work it is doing.

A. B. SWALES.

# Trade Unions in Soviet Russia

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**T**RADER UNIONISM, which historically arises out of the struggle of the workers against the capitalist system, had its origin in Russia (as in many other countries) in various forms of mutual aid societies among groups of workers. The late development of capitalism in Russia meant that trade unions were of only local importance up to the end of last century, although mutual benefit societies were in existence as early as 1838 among the printers of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and Moscow. It is also evident that these societies sometimes took industrial action, for the Tsarist Criminal Code of 1874 provides :—

“Persons accused of belonging to societies having the aim of rousing hostility between employers and workers and of provoking strikes are liable to imprisonment for 8 months with deprivation of rights and property and exile to Siberia.”

Nevertheless, by a series of local strikes against intolerable conditions, the masses of the workers were brought into the struggle in the nineties, under the leadership of Lenin and other revolutionary Socialists. In 1898 a number of the most active local unions united to form the Social Democratic Party on a revolutionary basis, and pushed ahead rapidly with the work of organisation. Thus the Russian trade unions were imbued with Socialism from the beginning.

## The Police Unions and " 1905 "

In order to counteract this Socialist trade unionism, the Tsarist Secret Police themselves set up trade unions in Moscow, Minsk, Odessa, and other industrial centres. But the unions they created soon became the motive force in a series of large strikes. It was the police unions of factory workers, formed in St. Petersburg, that took the initiative in the series of strikes and demonstrations which ended in the shooting down of large numbers of peaceful demonstrators on January 9th, 1905 (" Bloody Sunday "). This massacre gave a great impetus to organisation, and in the course of 1905 strikes and demonstrations developed in every part of the country, and in October of that year, the first trade union conference in Russia was held. Many of the new unions were at first under the control of the Cadets (Liberals), but rapidly fell under Socialist influence. By the end of 1905 the trade unions had been formed in every important industrial town and in February, 1906, when the second trade union conference was held, reports showed that there were 200,000 organised workers throughout the country. Locally the delegates from workshops combined in delegate councils or " Soviets."

With the defeat of the first revolutionary movement in 1906, the Tsarist Government began the ruthless extermination of the trade unions ; Executive members were arrested and exiled, funds were confiscated, meetings were prohibited, and from then until 1917 the trade unions were almost non-existent. The Police Department records showed that in 1907, 104 trade unions were closed

down. In spite of police activities, the movement for organisation, inspired by the majority section of the Social Democratic Party (Bolsheviks) again revived in 1912-13, and showed itself in the creation of a number of small local organisations, which, of course, were unable to work in the open and were constantly being attacked by the police. The war intensified the repression, and it was not until the March revolution of 1917, that the trade unions established their position. Immediately after the March revolution, 22 trade union boards met in Moscow, and created their council of trade unions.

### **The Councils of Workers' Delegates**

The existing unions were, of course, craft organisations, while the outbreak of the March revolution resulted in the spontaneous creation by the workers in the factories of their factory councils, representing all the workers at the factory, irrespective of craft. The development of these factory councils paved the way for the new form of trade union organisation on an industrial basis after the October revolution of 1917. Throughout the summer of 1917, however, the trade unions were rapidly extending their membership, partly on a craft basis, and partly on an industrial and even local basis. This extension of the trade unions was facilitated by the Petrograd Council of Workers' Delegates, which took the initiative in summoning the third All-Russian Trade Union Conference, which met at Petrograd on June 20th, 1917.

At this Conference, 3967 unions were represented, with a total membership of 1,475,000. In view of

the circumstances at the time, the chief question discussed was the function of the trade unions in the revolutionary struggle, but at the same time the Conference laid down important lines of organisation. It laid down the industrial principle as the correct basis, and decided that the factory committees should be subordinated to and be constituent elements in the industrial union, and established the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions. As the struggle of the summer developed, the membership of the unions increased and the trade unions were strong enough to take an active part in the October revolution. A few of the older craft organisations, such as the printers, at first took up a hostile attitude to the revolution, and the railwaymen were divided in opinion, but within a short time, the whole of the trade union organisations were united in support of the Soviet Government.

The first Congress after the revolution met in January, 1918, at which 2,523,000 organised workers were represented. From the first, the Congress emphasised the need to develop organisation on the industrial basis, and the second Congress, which met in January, 1919, defined an industrial union as one uniting all workers and employees of a given industry, independently of the particular functions they performed. The third Congress, which met in April, 1920 (when the membership had risen to 4,326,000) approved a scheme of organisation based on 23 industrial unions, and these 23 industrial unions have since remained as the organisations embracing the whole of Russian industry.

## **Membership Statistics**

The first Congress, in 1918, declared for compulsory membership in the unions for all persons engaged in any industry, and during the following years up to 1921, the number of members rapidly increased, reaching the figure of 8,500,000 in July, 1921. But the trade union organisation was as yet too undeveloped to make such huge masses take an active part in trade union work, and with the adoption of the new economic policy in 1921, compulsory membership was abolished and thereafter membership has been voluntary. The immediate result of the adoption of voluntary membership was the falling out of the unions of some 4,000,000 workers, and by October, 1922, only 4,500,000 workers were still attached to the unions. From that time forward, however, membership has shown a steady increase, reaching in July, 1926, over 9,250,000, distributed among the 23 industrial unions, as shown in the Table on page 9.

## **Structure of the Unions**

As was stated above, the basis of the Soviet Trade Unions is the factory or place of work ; all the workers in a particular factory, irrespective of craft, form the lowest unit in the trade union structure. The general meeting of the workers elects a factory committee ; in 1926, according to reports given at the Soviet Union Congress, there were 56,000 factory committees in existence. The number of members of the factory committee is much smaller than the usual branch committee in this country, the average being between 4 and 5, the 56,000 factory committees having a total of 226,000 members. The factory committee is



*Table showing the membership of the 23 Industrial Unions, and the percentage of each industry which is organised.*

No.	UNIONS.	1924. Oct. in '000's.	1926. July in '000's.	1926. July % of in- dustry organised.
1	Land and Forest,	379.3	1003.7	69.1
2	Paper Workers,	30.4	41.1	92.2
3	Miners, ...	321.5	457.0	87.0
4	Wood workers, ...	139.4	166.8	85.2
5	Leather workers,	101.1	121.4	91.7
6	Metal workers, ...	571.6	802.6	90.7
7	Printers, ...	85.8	112.0	96.4
8	Food workers, ...	300.2	432.1	87.0
9	Sugar workers, ...	103.2	98.3	95.6
10	Textile workers, ...	556.8	785.1	91.0
11	Chemical workers,	170.1	229.6	91.5
12	Clothing workers,	61.5	69.8	92.5
13	Building workers,	348.3	674.4	85.5
14	Water Transport,	131.1	155.4	94.6
15	Railwaymen, ...	810.1	1025.0	92.9
16	Local Transport,	158.0	178.8	96.0
17	Post, Telegraph, Telephone, ...	100.4	113.1	92.8
18	Art workers, ...	71.0	80.8	93.7
19	Public Health, ...	352.9	460.2	95.9
20	Educational Workers,	543.2	710.1	87.4
21	State, Public, and Com. Employees,	799.0	1113.4	83.2
22	Municipal, ...	184.2	234.3	93.9
23	Domestic & Hotel,	111.3	213.4	90.6
	Total in U.S.S.R.,	6430.5	9278.4	

responsible for calling regular meetings of the workers in the factory, and these meetings elect their representatives on various other special committees, such as the Club Committee, Sport Committee, Educational Work Committee, Co-operative Committee, etc., attached to the factory. The attendance at these general meetings of workers is fairly satisfactory, compared with the usual branch attendance in capitalist countries. The reports for 1926 show attendance of miners varying between 20 and 40 per cent. of the membership, of building workers between 20 and 50 per cent., of leather workers 35 to 50 per cent., and so on.

In the whole of this work, steady efforts have been made to draw the women workers into responsible positions in the trade unions. Particulars available cover 11,800 factory committees in 1926, and the total percentage of women on these committees was 28·3.

The next unit in the organisation is the District Committee; this is composed of representatives from the factory committees in a particular area.

The different district committees in turn send delegates to the provincial committee, which unites all the district committees of a particular province. In turn, the provincial committees send delegates forward to the All-Russian Executive Committee of the Union. In each union, of course, there is a regular Congress, where reports are made and discussed, the lines of future work laid down, and the representatives on various organisations appointed. The structure of the unions is very uniform, thanks to the general application of the

principle of industrial unionism, based on :—  
“ One Factory, One Union.”

### **Finance**

The uniform subscription of 2 per cent. of wages is paid by the members of every trade union. During the years of building up the unions, the collection of membership dues was very much in arrears, and considerable efforts have been necessary to put the finances on a sound basis. In the course of the last two years, however, the union finances have got on to a firm basis, and each of the unions now has accumulated funds sufficient for its needs, although it is hoped to undertake further activities with the increase of funds which is to be expected.

### **Social and Educational Work**

Practically every large factory or other place of work has its Club, controlled by a special committee elected by the workers. In 1926, there were 3418 such clubs, with a total membership of 1,020,000, of which men formed 67 per cent. and women 33 per cent. The club activities cover a very wide range, including musical, dramatic, sport, and other groups, as well as cinema, library, lectures, besides, of course, study groups, of which there are large numbers. It is interesting to see that the sport groups in 1926 had a membership of 350,000 ; under the Tsarist Regime sport was almost unknown to the Russian workers.

But the most widespread legacy of the Tsarist Regime was the complete ignorance even of how to read and write. Although the Soviet Government has been working steadily at this problem through the educational machinery, the workers

who come in from the country districts are still almost entirely uneducated, and the trade unions are paying special attention to their education at the factories. In 1926, for example, 140,000 workers and peasants were taught to read and write through the factory committees, many of them being over 30 years of age. As the knowledge of reading and writing increased, the demand for books and libraries has also risen. The trade union reports show that in January, 1925, there were a total of 6803 factory libraries, with a total of 10,000,000 books; in 1926, the number had increased to 8085 libraries, and 16,500,000 books.

The development of Workers' Co-operatives among the workers of a particular factory is regarded by the trade unions as of the greatest importance. In the first place, considerable savings are made to the individual worker; many of the Co-operatives run restaurants at which the workers can obtain good meals considerably cheaper than anywhere outside; and groceries, clothing, etc., are naturally obtained far cheaper through the Co-operatives than anywhere else. And secondly, the concentration of workers' wages on their own Co-operative Societies helps to weaken the private shops and private trade generally.

### **Workers' Control**

Apart from the work of the trade unions among their own members, each trade union and local trade union organisation plays its part in the control of production, of administration, and even of Government. The British Trade Union Congress Delegation to Russia in 1920 emphasised the fact that in Russia the workers are the ruling class, and this rule is exercised in practically every sphere

through the trade union machinery. The whole apparatus of local and central government is built up on delegates appointed by the workers at particular factories and places of work, *i.e.*, in effect by the basic unit of trade union organisation.

### **At the Factories**

In the first days of the revolution, the factory committees of the workers were in complete control of every detail of work at the factory. Generally speaking, however, this was found unworkable, and the present position is that the factory committee has, as it were, a watching brief on the manager and can require explanations, contest decisions, make suggestions, etc., but does not control the day to day working of the factory. There are also periodical full meetings of workers at the factory, at which the manager has to report on the financial and general position of the factory, and stand up to criticism.

The district committees have considerable influence through representation on the Government's economic organisation within the district, and *e.g.*, in the case of the miners, the managers of particular pits are appointed in agreement with the district miners' organisation. Similarly the provincial committees of the trade unions are represented on the higher bodies, and finally the central executive of each trade union is represented on the central administration of the industry in which they are concerned. The All-Russian Council of Trade Unions—the equivalent of our General Council of the Trade Union Congress—is represented on *e.g.*, The Commissariats of Labour, Health, Social Insurance, etc., and the All-Russian Council itself is elected by a Trade Union Congress

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